

Video Game Cultures + Criticism



Tuesday/Thursday, 12:30pm-2:00pm (RTF 331P 4) – Unique number: 09684

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Office hours: Tuesday, 3-4pm – in person; Online by appointment

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Course Description

The aim of this course is to provide students with tools to understand how games are embedded with historical and cultural aspects of the society that created them. Games are considered socially, historically and culturally bounded by the time and the people who created them. These tools are useful when analyzing and starting to design your own games. This course is divided into three modules. The first one is theory-based and aims to provide you some tools on analyzing critically a game. The second module is based on in-class group meetings that will require you and your group to do some research on social issues and analyze how a game portray them. The last module will give you some experience with game design as you will prototype your own game. It must be based on your experiences and interests and show your capabilities of addressing games critically. You are not required to know any coding nor have game design experience. There will be an assignment at the end of each module and a final paper.

Required Reading

Readings are listed below and assigned chapters and articles are to be read *before class*. You should be prepared to pose questions and discuss the texts during the class. The weekly

readings are available on the course's Canvas site, under "Files". You are allowed to download and print out the documents, at your convenience.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to:

1. Understand a game as a cultural product, tied to the time and place it was developed
2. Analyze a game critically
3. Have a basic notion of game design
4. Be able to communicate thoughts and ideas in several forms (written, spoken, visual)

Grading breakdown

At the end of each module, the student will be required to deliver an assignment to the instructor. Each assignment will measure different learning outcomes from the course.

Assignment Table

Assignments	Point Value	Outcome Measured
Class Participation	10	4
Play experiences (First Module)	10	2 and 4
Theoretical Paper (First Module)	10	2 and 4
Group Presentation (Second Module)	25	1, 2, and 4
Game (Third Module)	20	3 and 4
Final Paper	25	1, 3 and 4

Grading Scale

A = 100-94 A- = 90-93 B+ = 87-89 B = 84-86 B- = 80-83
C+ = 77-79 C = 74-76 C- = 70-73 D = 60-69 F = 0-59

Assignment Descriptions

Class Participation and attendance (during the course): each student will be evaluated on class participation and contribution to discussions. Besides that, there will be times in which you will become peer reviewer from your colleagues' works and this contribution will also be evaluated. Knowledge and experiences exchanges are encouraged and only possible in class environment, so attendance is required for the course. Grades will be docked by one letter after the third non-justified absence. If an emergency, illness or any other situation occurs, please contact Dr. Fontolan so we can sort the situation. Alternatively, students may send one question based on the readings per class.

Play experiences (during the first module): you will be required to play a game from the list provided for at least one hour and write a paragraph analyzing it in relation with the discussions held during the first module up until the due date. 1 page (double spaced).

Theoretical Paper (at the end of first module): you will be required to deliver a 2-3 pages (double spaced) paper, with at least 2 scholarly sources. You will be required to expand the readings on one of the following topics: video games and identities (choose either gender, race or disability) or video games and work.

Group Presentation (at the end of the second module): each group will research on a specific topic and analyze an already-existing game. The group will be required to reflect upon how a game of the group's own choice discusses one topic also chosen by them. The groups will be formed by 3-5 people and there will be time during class to work on this. At the end of this module, each group should present their findings to their classmates and discuss the topic with them after the presentation. Each group must collectively submit a 3-4 page (double spaced) paper detailing the analysis.

Game (at the end of the third module): During this module, you will research and develop a game that addresses a social issue you care about and develop a game around it. It is not required for it to be a digital one and you can only re-skin a non-digital game you like. I am expecting a game prototype, as the goal is to experience critically how games are made. This prototype document must include: 1. Game summary: description of story and game world; 2. Gameplay: rules and winning conditions; 3. Level design (just one level), including its interface; 4. Main character and at least one NPC; 5. A list of at least 3 other games comparable to yours, the target audience, and at least three game tags. Any kind of game and social issue will be accepted upon prior discussion with Dr. Fontolan.

Final paper: a final paper with 4-6 pages (double spaced). It must include bibliography and at least 4 scholarly sources. It must address the game you developed during the third module, including: 1. a discussion on how your game addresses games critically (at least 2 pages); 2. your game's documentation prototype; 3. a discussion on how this game should be localized to other regions of the world.

Late work

All assignments and due dates are described in this syllabus. If you feel that you will not be able to deliver the assignment on time, please contact Dr. Fontolan in advance so we can work a new delivery schedule. Late assignments that are not excused will be deducted 1 letter grade per day.

Writing Flag

This course carries the Writing Flag. Writing Flag courses are designed to give students experience with writing in an academic discipline. In this class, you can expect to write regularly during the semester, complete substantial writing projects, and receive feedback from your instructor to help you improve your writing. You will also have the opportunity to revise one or more assignments, and you may be asked to read and discuss your peers' work.

You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from your written work. Writing Flag classes meet the Core Communications objectives of Critical Thinking, Communication, Teamwork, and Personal Responsibility, established by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Course Policies

Attendance policy

See “class participation and attendance” for more information.

Diversity

During classes, you will be encouraged to share your own experiences, opinions and understandings of different perspectives. Sometimes, talking about a subject may not be easy to someone, so patience, empathy and respect are required. Do not hesitate to talk to Dr. Fontolan (in whatever format you find fit) if you are suffering any kind of discrimination and/or unsettledness during the discussions proposed.

Pronouns and Social Name

I will gladly honor your request to address you by a name that is different from what appears on the official roster and by the gender pronouns you use (she/he/they/ze, etc.). Please, let me know if either your name and pronouns are different than the ones appearing at the official records.

Accessible, Inclusive, and Compliant Statement

The university is committed to creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment consistent with university policy and federal and state law. Please let me know if you experience any barriers to learning so I can work with you to ensure you have equal opportunity to participate fully in this course. If you are a student with a disability, or think you may have a disability, and need accommodations please contact Disability and Access (D&A). Please refer to D&A’s website for contact and more information: <http://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/>. If you are already registered with D&A, please deliver your Accommodation Letter to me as early as possible in the semester so we can discuss your approved accommodations and needs in this course.

Sharing Course Materials

No materials used in this class, including, but not limited to, lecture hand-outs, videos, assessments (quizzes, exams, papers, projects, homework assignments), in-class materials, review sheets, and additional problem sets, may be shared online or with anyone outside of the class without explicit, written permission of the instructor. Unauthorized sharing of materials promotes cheating. The University is aware of the sites used for sharing materials, and any materials found online that are associated with you, or any suspected unauthorized sharing of materials, will be reported to [Student Conduct and Academic Integrity](#) in the Office of the Dean of Students. These reports can result in initiation of the student conduct process

and include charge(s) for academic misconduct, potentially resulting in sanctions, including a grade impact.

The University of Texas Honor Code

The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the University is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.

Academic Integrity

If a student is caught plagiarizing or using AI tools (such as ChatGPT) to complete assignments, he/she/they will be graded zero and the case will be sent to the dean. If the same student is caught a second time caught plagiarizing, he/she/they will fail the course automatically. For more information, please visit the Student Judicial services Web site at <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs>

Writing Support

Even the best writers sometimes struggle when learning the unique language of communication professionals. Whether you're writing your first news story or advertising copy or you're polishing a screenplay, the Moody Writing Support Program can help boost your skill while providing encouragement to succeed. You can schedule a one-on-one session with a qualified writing coach from your department to brainstorm ideas, polish skills or work on problems.

Mental Health

The college experience is stressful, and managing your mental health is central to your success. Please alert Dr. Fontolan immediately to work out a plan if any personal issues impede you to keep track. Also seek professional support at <https://www.cmhc.utexas.edu/>.

Safety

If you have concerns about the safety or behavior of fellow students, TAs or Professors, call BCAL (the Behavior Concerns Advice Line): 512-232-5050. Your call can be anonymous. If something doesn't feel right – it probably isn't. Trust your instincts and share your concerns.

Title IX Reporting

Beginning January 1, 2020, Texas Education Code, Section 51.252 (formerly known as [Senate Bill 212](#)) requires all employees of Texas universities, including faculty, report any information to the [Title IX Office](#) regarding sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence and stalking that is disclosed to them. Texas law requires that all employees who witness or receive any information of this type (including, but not limited to, written forms, applications, one-on-one conversations, class assignments, class discussions, or third-party reports) must report it to the [Title IX Coordinator](#). Before talking with me, or with any faculty or staff member about a Title IX related incident, please remember that I will be required to report this information.

If you want to speak with someone for support or remedies without making an official report to the university, email advocate@austin.utexas.edu. For more information about reporting options and resources, visit <https://titleix.utexas.edu/> or contact the Title IX Office at titleix@austin.utexas.edu.

Indigenous Land Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on the Indigenous lands of Turtle Island, the ancestral name for what now is called North America. Moreover, we would like to acknowledge the Alabama-Coushatta, Caddo, Carrizo/Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Comanche, Kickapoo, Lipan Apache, Tonkawa and Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo, and all the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of these lands and territories in Texas.

Course Calendar and readings

Week 1 – First Module

August, 22nd Introduction to Course

The class will be introduced to the syllabus and assignments. A detailed account on course's assignments, office hours, and rules will be discussed.

August, 24th Games and Game Studies

This class introduces game studies and how we study games.

Required Reading:

FRISSEN, V.; LAMMES, S.; DE LANGE, M.; DE MUL, J.; RAESSENS, J. (2015). "Homo ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity". In: FRISSEN, V.; LAMMES, S.; DE LANGE, M.; DE MUL, J.; RAESSENS, J. (ed) *Playful Identities - The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*. Amsterdam University Press.

Week 2 – First Module

August, 29th Games and Social Issues 1

In this class, we discuss games as artifacts and how artifacts can convey social issues, power, and identities.

Required Reading:

WINNER, L. (1980) "Do Artifacts Have Politics?". *Daedalus*. Vol. 109, No. 1, winter. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024652>

August, 31st Games and Social Issues 2

We continue the discussion on games as artifacts, and the problem of creating conventions.

Required Reading:

PERRON, B. (2014). "Conventions". In: WOLF, M. J. P.; PERRON, B. (ed) *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Week 3 – First Module

September, 5th Games and the Past

This class address how the past is socially constructed and bounded both to the present time and the ones who wrote about it. Video games representing the past are no different.

Required Reading:

MCCALL, J. (2020). "The Historical Problem Space Framework: Games as a Historical Medium". *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research*, volume 20, issue 3, August 2020. Available at: <http://gamestudies.org/2003/articles/mccall>

September, 7th Games and Identity 1

This discussion focuses on how games are capable of portraying several identities and making players develop their own identities around it.

Required Reading:

SHAW, A. (2015). "When and Why Representation Matters to Players: Realism versus Escapism". In: *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, Minneapolis. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816693153.003.0005>

Week 4 – First Module

September, 12th Games and Identity 2

This class continues the discussions on games and identities.

Required Reading:

GRACE, L. (2021). "An Introduction to Black Games, Blackness in Games, and Otherness". In: *Black Game Studies: An Introduction to the games, game makers and scholarship of the African Diaspora*. Carnegie Mellon University, ETC Press, Pittsburgh. DUE - Play Experience, 11:59pm CST on Canvas: *Myst* (Steam), *Age of Empires* (Steam), *Metal Gear Solid* (several platforms), *Super Mario World* (SNES, Switch), *Sonic The Hedgehog* (Mega Drive, Steam), *Super Metroid* (SNES, Switch), *Bioshock* (several platforms).

September, 14th Gender and Queer Studies, and Games 1

This class addresses gender and queerness in video games and game studies.

Required Reading:

MALAZITA, J. (2018). "The Material Undermining of Magical Feminism in BioShock Infinite: Burial at Sea". In: GRAY, K., VOORHEES, G., VOSSEN, E. (eds). *Feminism in Play, Palgrave Games in Context*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90539-6_3

Week 5 – First Module

September, 19th Gender and Queer Studies, and Games 2

This class continues the discussions on games, gender and queerness.

Required Reading:

BURRIL, D. A. (2017) "Queer Theory, the Body, and Video Games". In: RUBERG, B.; SHAW, A. *Queer Game Studies*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

September, 21st Race, Ethnicity and Games

This class addresses race and ethnicity in video games and game studies.

Required reading:

LEONARD, D. J. (2006) "Not a Hater, Just Keepin' It Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies". *Games and Culture*. Volume 1 Number 1, January 2006 83-88. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281910>
DUE - Play Experience, 11:59pm CST on Canvas: *The Sims 4* (Steam), *League of Legends* (PC), *Pokémon Go* (Mobile), *Fortnite* (several platforms), *Minecraft* (several platforms).

Week 6 – First Module

September, 26th Mental Health, Disability, and Games

This class addresses disability and mental health in video games and game studies.

Required Reading:

MANGIRON, C. (2021). Game Accessibility: Taking Inclusion to the Next Level. In: ANTONA, M.; STEPHANIDIS, C. (eds) *Universal Access in Human-Computer Interaction. Design Methods and User Experience*. HCII 2021. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 12768. Springer, Cham. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78092-0_17

September, 28th Game Localization

A game is socially, historically and culturally bounded by those who created them. So, how to translate it into different cultural settings?

Required Reading:

MANGIRON, C. (2021). Found in Translation: Evolving Approaches for the Localization of Japanese Video Games. *Arts.*; 10(1):9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10010009>

Week 7 – First Module

October, 3rd Games and Work

This class discusses aspects related to work on the video game industry.

Required Reading:

NAKAMURA, L. (2009). "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft", *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26:2, 128-144, <https://lnakamur.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/donthatetheplayer.pdf>

October, 5th eSports

Expanding on the discussions related to games and work, this class discusses the professional gaming scene.

Required Reading:

REITMAN, J. G., ANDERSON-COTO, M. J., WU, M., LEE, J. S., & STEINKUEHLER, C. (2020). "Esports Research: A Literature Review". *Games and Culture*, 15(1), 32–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019840892>

Week 8 – First and Second Modules

October, 10th End of Module 1: Assignment 1 Presentation

Each student should make a short presentation on the topic he/she choose to address for their theoretical paper. The other students should also participate on this class as peer reviewers.

October, 12th Analyzing Games

In this class, we discuss some of the methods to analyze games.

Required Reading:

ARJORANTA, J. (2022). "How are Games Interpreted? Hermeneutics for Game Studies". *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research*, volume 22, issue 3, August 2022. Available at: http://gamestudies.org/2203/articles/arjoranta_how_are_games_interpreted

*On this day, the class will be divided into groups that will work together during the second module of this course. The aim for each group is to research and analyze a game and how it portrays social issues. If you are not able to make it to class in this day, please contact Dr. Fontolan as soon as possible, so we can put you in a group.

Week 9 – Second Module

October, 17th

Required activities:

Group research: In this class, each group must make a pitch presentation on the work under development. The other students shall discuss their work with them, as peer reviewers.

October, 19th

Required activities:

Group research: part of the class dedicated to the group work.

Week 10 – Second Module

October, 24th

Required activities:

Group research: part of the class dedicated to the group work.

*October, 26th**

*This class will be held online, as Dr. Fontolan will be attending the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts 2023 Conference.

Required activities:

Group research: part of the class dedicated to the group work.

Week 11 – Second and Third Module

October, 31st

Halloween costumes not required, but encouraged!

End of Module 2 - Assignment 2 Presentation: each group should present their findings to the whole class. Paper due 11:59pm CST on Canvas.

November, 2nd Game Design

Up until this point, we discussed on social issue representations in games. Now it is time to understand a little bit of game design.

Required Reading:

Fullerton, T. (2019). "How to Prototype," "Prototyping Your Original Game Idea," and "Tools for Visualizing". *Game design workshop: a playcentric approach to creating innovative games*.

Each student will present a pitch for the game to be developed, also send a written pitch (1 paragraph) to Dr. Fontolan. Due 11:59pm CST on Canvas.

Week 12 – Third Module

Online classes: Dr. Fontolan will attend the Society for Social Studies of Science 2023 Conference

November 7th and November 9th

Game Design: class dedicated for the students to work on their projects.

Dr. Fontolan will be available online during the time of the class for discussing issues with students.

Students get assigned their Module 3 presentation day

Week 13 – Third Module

November 14th

Game Design: class dedicated for the students to work on their projects. Optional: you can use this class to do some playtesting, if you are advanced enough.

November, 16th

Game Design: class dedicated for the students to work on their projects. Optional: you can use this class to do some playtesting, if you are advanced enough.

Week 14 – Fall Break, no classes

Week 15 – Third Module

November, 28th

- Assignment 3 Presentation: half class presents

November, 30th

- Assignment 3 Presentation: half class presents

December, 1st

- All Module 3 papers are due this day, 11:59pm CST on Canvas.

Suggested Readings:

- “Kellee Santiago: Independent Game Development”. In: Heineman, D. S. *Thinking about Video Games: Interviews with the Experts*. Indiana University Press, 2015.
- AUSTIN, J. ““The hardest battles are fought in the mind”: Representations of Mental Illness in Ninja Theory’s Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice”. *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research*, volume 21, issue 4, December 2021. Available at: <http://gamestudies.org/2104/articles/austin>
- BECKETT, A. E., & CAMPBELL, T. (2015). “The social model of disability as an oppositional device”. *Disability & Society*, 30(2), 270-283.
- BUTLER, J. (1990) “Subjects of sex/gender/desire”. In: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- CALLEJA, G. (2015) “Ludic identities and the magic circle”. In: FRISSEN, V.; LAMMES, S.; DE LANGE, M.; DE MUL, J.; RAESSENS, J. (ed) *Playful Identities – The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, Amsterdam University Press.
- CARLSON, R.; CORLISS, J. (2011). “Imagined Commodities: Video Game Localization and Mythologies of Cultural Difference”. *Games and Culture*, 6:61. Source: <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/6/1/61>
- CORLISS, J. (2011) “Introduction: The Social Science Study of Video Games”. *Games and Culture*, 6: 3. Available at: <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/6/1/3>
- DANEELS, R.; DENOO, M.; VANDEWALLE, A.; DUPONT, B.; MALLIET, S. (2022). “The Digital Game Analysis Protocol (DiGAP): Introducing a Guide for Reflexive and Transparent Game Analyses”. *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research*, volume 22, issue 2, April 2022. Available at: http://gamestudies.org/2202/articles/gap_daneels_denoo_vandewalle_dupont_malliet
- DYER-WITHEFORD, N.; PEUTER, G. (2009). “Immaterial Labor: A Workers’ History of Videogaming”. *Games of empire: global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Engelbrecht, J. (2020). “The New Lara Phenomenon: A Postfeminist Analysis of Rise of the Tomb Raider”. *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research*, volume 20, issue 3, August 2020. Available at: <http://gamestudies.org/2003/articles/engelbrecht>

- GRACE, L. (2021). "An overview of Games Made by Black Game Makers". In: *Black Game Studies: An Introduction to the games, game makers and scholarship of the African Diaspora*. Carnegie Mellon University, ETC Press, Pittsburgh.
- HUIZINGA, J. (1944) "Nature and Significand of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon". In: *Homo Ludens – a study of the play element in culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- MIR, R.; OWENS, T. "Modeling Indigenous People: Unpacking Ideology in Sid Meyer's Civilization". In: KAPELL, M. W.; ELLIOTT, A. B. R. (ed). *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- PHILLIPS, A. (2020). "Introduction". In: *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*, NYU Press, New York.
- ROUSE III, R. "Design". In: WOLF, M. J. P.; PERRON, B. (ed) *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- SOTAMAA, O. (2014) "Artifact". In: WOLF, M. J. P.; PERRON, B. (ed) *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- WOHN, D. Y., & FREEMAN, G. (2020). "Live Streaming, Playing, and Money Spending Behaviors in eSports". *Games and Culture*, 15(1), 73–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019859184>

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